

VZCZCXYZ0002
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBU #0203 0271918
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 271918Z JAN 06
FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3237
INFO RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 1754
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 5090
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 4909
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ JAN MONTEVIDEO 5288
RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION 5318
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 0830

UNCLAS BUENOS AIRES 000203

SIPDIS

WHA/EX FOR TOM SHANNON
WHA/BSC FOR DOUG BARNES
NSC FOR DAN FISK AND SUE CRONIN
INL FOR LAIZA CASAS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: SNAR AR
SUBJECT: COCAINE BUST CAUSES BANANA TRUCK BOTTLENECK

¶1. SUMMARY: On December 31, members of the Gendarmeria Nacional seized 738 kilograms of cocaine in Jose C. Paz, Buenos Aires Province, hidden inside bags of charcoal. The operation included the arrests of ten individuals, among them three brothers of the Motok family, a known Salta-based drug trafficking organization operating in the north of Argentina. Searches also resulted in evidence linking the smuggling to an Argentine customs official working at the International Port of Entry at Profesor Salvador Mazza, Salta Province. The cocaine came from Bolivia in a banana truck and, in response, Bolivia has begun searching trucks entering and leaving the country. This has caused delays, affecting banana producers in both countries and caused tension. END SUMMARY.

¶2. A search on December 31 conducted by the Gendarmeria Nacional resulted in the confiscation of 738 kilograms of cocaine hidden in bags of charcoal at a residence in Jose C. Paz, Buenos Aires Province. The operation included the arrest of nine Argentine nationals and one Bolivian national including three brothers, Ernesto, Hector and Alejandrino Motok, all members of a known family-based drug trafficking organization operating in the north of Argentina. Involved mainly in the transportation of drugs, the Motoks are based near the Bolivian border in Profesor Salvador Mazza, Salta Province. Investigators learned that Ernesto Motok was driving a car registered to an Argentine customs officer that had been working at the Argentina/Bolivia border. A follow-up search at the officer's residence produced documentation linking him to drug smuggling operations involving banana trucks crossing the border. He is currently being sought by Argentine authorities and thought to be in Bolivia.

¶3. Smuggling of drugs is widespread near the border, and one of the most common methods of concealing drugs is in banana trucks, given the heavy odor which can deceive dogs. Drugs are often smuggled across the border from Bolivia and then transferred at some point along the route in Argentina. In this case the cocaine crossed the border in a banana truck and was later hidden in charcoal. An investigation into the truck and driver involved in this particular incident revealed that the driver had been "robbed" three times in the recent past, a tactic that allows drivers to account for missing cargo. To combat this, all trucks are inspected by the Argentine law enforcement agencies at the border crossing, as well as at various checkpoints within the northern provinces. Inspection is routine for banana

trucks coming into Argentina from Bolivia and can take several hours. In the past, trucks were regularly searched only on the Argentine side of the border by Argentine Customs, with the participation of an embedded Bolivian counterpart, which kept the wait manageable.

¶4. According to GOA sources, following the high-profile seizure, Bolivia has increased security and begun to search incoming and outgoing trucks. Border crossings now involve two checkpoints, requiring additional time, long delays and, according to angry banana producers, spoilt produce.

Bolivian growers have blamed Argentina for the problems although reports are that Argentine authorities have not changed their policy since before the December cocaine incident. Rather, Bolivia has made changes in its customs procedures, which has caused tensions with Argentine growers who have been angered by Bolivian Customs seizing trucks for inspection and allowing fruit to rot while they wait.

GUTIERREZ